

We breathe toxic air

Health brings more happiness than wealth. Wealth can buy external world and factors to supplement our desired life. But it does not create internal locus of control and intrinsic happiness that has to come from within. And, uninterrupted access to clean air is a critical determinant in this health versus wealth equation. Though over a billion South Asians have yet to smell real wealth they are already poor and very sick, essentially because they breathe polluted air. According to a report titled State of Global Air 2019, released by the US-based Health Effects Institute, in Pakistan in 2017, there were 128,000 deaths attributed to polluted air, with children being prime victims. Pakistan's entire population lives in areas that exceed WHO's air quality guidelines. Even when it is not the first time disclosure about the poor quality of air we in Pakistan breathe still what this report says is stunning - all the more for our colossal failure to fight back this marauding menace. In fact, as a government and a people we spare no effort to promote air pollution. Only last month Pakistan, jubilantly, linked the first major coal-fired power station. Of course a debate how to improve quality of air does erupt at governmental and non-governmental platforms when winter smog takes over, paralyzing inter-city traffic in some parts of the country. But what follows is anybody's guess. The truth is that air pollution despite being so hurtful to national health doesn't receive the kind of attention and counter-action it duly warrants. India too is equally inefficient: twenty-two of the top 30 most polluted cities are in India. But we do know that China, a country that only recently topped the WHO list for deadly outdoor pollution, has aggressively moved against this calamity by strictly implementing emission regulations and adopting clean-energy technology. In fact, we as a people not only breathe toxic air we as a country also run the risk of growing dim on our international commitments under the SDG's specific environmental targets.

According to the State of Global Air 2019, 'just breathing air in our cities is equivalent to being a heavy smoker'. The question how to give up on this heavy-smoking addiction has no easy answer, but given national resolve and official mindset it is quite possible. The people need to be educated in pollution-free disposal of garbage, shun post-harvested stubble burning and discourage the use of kiln-baked bricks. Equally important is that the people keep an eye on elements that set forests on fire in areas otherwise inaccessible to government fire-fighters. However, much more is expected of the government - by ensuring that people get clean air and don't die of toxic pollution. We don't know if there is tangible follow-up on the pleadings made by the advocacy group Air Quality Asia to the parliamentarians last month. Pity, an action clearly the responsibility of national legislators was to be driven home by an NGO. The challenge of increasing growing air pollution is so massive that by now a lot of thinking and concrete action should have gone into it. Introduction of clean-energy technology in the industrial sector and smoke-free vehicles on roads are the two inescapably tasks already cut out for the government. The options to harness solar and wind powers are also there to be exploited. All of that should have been done long ago, but the second best time for accomplishing this task is right now. Singapore did it long ago by thinning out traffic on roads. China too didn't take long to control the particulate matter in air. It may take Pakistan many decades to catch up with the materially rich countries, but to become green and pollution-free is within its reach. What we need is consciousness of this problem and a committed mind to go after it.

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